

# radical democracy

interview:

**bill ayers**

students for a democratic society

the weather underground

professor of education, retired,

university of illinois, chicago



## **David Olson interviews Bill Ayers**

Bill is a Civil Rights and anti-war organizer, education reformer, and former member and leader of Students for a Democratic Society [SDS]. He was a co-founder of the militant, anti-imperialist Weather Underground, which famously declared war against “the government of the United States,” in 1970.

After being implicated in a bombing of the Pentagon, which caused significant damages but no casualties, Bill spent several years living as a fugitive with his wife and fellow Weather Underground cofounder, Bernadine Dohrn.

Ayers is a Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago [retired]. He is also the author of several books, including two memoirs, *Fugitive Days* and *Public Enemy*. We spoke in the winter of 2015 about education reform, the context of founding the Weather Underground, and what it means to be radical. **A later interview with Bill is available on RD’s Medium.com Magazine**, and focuses on his latest book, “Demand the Impossible: A Radical Manifesto.”



**Radical Democracy:** Militant revolutionary to education reformer at first seems like an odd career path-but in fact, you had been a teacher before you co-founded the Weather Underground. Can you talk a little about why education has always been such a central issue for you?

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**Bill Ayers: The fight for social justice, the fight for peace and freedom, has always been linked to the fight for education.** This is partly because of my own quirky personal history, but I've thought about it over the decades and I think it's true: education and democracy, education and freedom, education and peace, they go hand in hand. They are of a piece.

I began teaching in Ann Arbor in 1965 as part of the Free School Movement, which was in many ways influenced by the Freedom Schools in the South and the upsurge of the Civil Rights Movement. Earlier that year I was first arrested for opposing the war, and when I went to jail for that civil disobedience, I met people who were involved in beginning the Childrens' Community preschool. And so I walked out of jail into my first teaching job. Our hashtag, so to speak, was "an experiment in freedom and integration for young children."

The idea, very much a part of the zeitgeist of the time, was that we were fighting for a racially just society, and we were fighting for freedom, and this little preschool was part of that.

**RD:** Civil Rights was the on-ramp for many people joining the movement. I see the connection through the Freedom Schools... but how did you move from a preschool teacher to being a militant revolutionary?

**BA:** The sixties wore on, and by 1968 we were convinced that we were going to end the war. We had fought for three years to end the war, and it appeared that when Lyndon Johnson stepped away from the presidency, we had won; that the war — which had cost a million lives at that point — was going to be brought to an end. So we were in a celebratory mood in early April 1968.

Then four days later Dr. Martin Luther King was killed, and a few months after that Bobby Kennedy was killed, and a few months after that it was clear that the war would not end but would escalate. Fred Hampton would be assassinated, the serial killing of Black Freedom leaders continued and escalated, and the Movement was in a crisis.

And in that crisis, some of us joined the Democratic Party and tried to build a Peace and Freedom wing. Some of us left the country on the great migration away from war into Canada—my brother was one of those. Some went into communes, others to Europe or Africa. And a small group of us built the clandestine capacity to survive what we considered an oncoming Police State, a unique American fascism — and to take the war to the warmakers.



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And so we started the Weather Underground. I was underground from 1970 to 1981. And even underground I returned to teaching, in 1977. So I taught from 1965 to 1968 and then from 1977 onward. And when I came aboveground in 1981, I returned to teaching, returned to school, got involved in graduate education, got my doctorate and became a professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



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**RD:** In recent years you've been very active in education reform, especially in Chicago, where you've been a professor of education for the last twenty some years. Can you talk about that work a bit?

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**BA:** The connection between democracy and education, freedom and education, and between aesthetics and education all seemed very self-evident to me. The more I've been involved in education, the deeper that connection has become.

So, my work has been Urban Schools Reform — a fight I consider in many ways a continuation of the Civil Rights fight: the fight for access, for recognition, for equity and equality over the last four decades, I guess.

**For the last decade and a half, “school reform,” as it’s called, has been seized by corporate powers, by the financial industry, by right-wing foundations.** And in many ways, education is, appropriately, one of the fronts upon which politics are fought out.

Our vision of a good society, a decent world, democracy, and our vision of participation is all being fought out in the schools. And that’s not just true in the United States, it’s true everywhere.

**RD:** What do you think of how the political and social movements of the ‘60s are taught today?

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**BA:** One of the things we have to remember is that the question of schools has always been contested. It always will be contested. What that requires of us is that we be aware, informed, keep our eyes open, keep acting on the known demands of us ... and that we pay attention. **That's rule number one: Pay attention. Open your eyes.** And bring things forward through a variety of means and methods.

The Zinn Education Project is something I feel very connected to and very strongly about. And Rethinking Schools is an organization that has spent the last several decades really pushing the notion that we can rethink curriculum and teaching in ways that are more honest and more fair. But not only is the present contested, but the past is always contested. And this is how corporate reform works. In state after state, with the leadership of ALEC [American Legislative Exchange Council], states have passed rules and regulations about the teaching of history.

In Florida they passed a law that says history shall not be taught as an interpretation, and needs to be taught as “facts that are noble, teachable and testable.” So that's history from the State of Florida. But of course nobody actually believes that, and anybody with their eyes even dimly open recognizes

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that history is not only what happened, it's what people *think* happened. It's how we interpret what happened. So it's the thing and the interpretation. And people like you and me have to be engaged in the question, "What does it mean that this happened?"

So, whatever curriculum you develop for Radical Democracy, whatever documents you make available, to me the most important thing isn't substituting the good material for the bad. Over the years in my own teaching and in the teaching that I advocate, that's never been the question for me. **The question is: How do you ask more questions? How do you frame more questions and ask people to do more digging, more investigating, to ask more of their own questions?**

A pedagogy for liberation is a pedagogy of questioning. It's not a matter of saying, "Don't read that Adam Smith, read Marx." That's not the answer. The answer is to ask questions of the universe to get in your own head the idea that there's more to know, and more to understand. In an infinitely expanding universe you can never know everything. So the educated person is a person who continues to poke and prod and ask the next question.



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**What's always inspired me is the 1964 Mississippi Freedom School**

**Curriculum: a twenty-some-page**

**curriculum of questions.** That's how we get smart. We ask questions. We don't come to easy conclusions. And the beautiful thing about a classroom as opposed to, say, a courtroom or a newsroom where you have narratives that have to be summed up, and finished, and competing. In a classroom you can always ask the next question, because you're never done. And that's why I love it.

**RD:** I'm definitely avoiding any neat solutions, or a ready-to-go ideology. Radical Democracy is really an invitation to explore — explore what is included, and what is not, as well.

**BA:** If I were in your shoes thinking about how to present this stuff, I would always want to frame it as uncovering more material because we have more questions. And guess what? There are still more questions. You can also ask those questions, you can reinterpret and make sense on your own in conversation with others, but **don't think that we've got the last word here because we printed a document or gave you a book. A book is to be questioned. A document is to be reexamined.**

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**RD:** One of the inspirations for this project is the idea that the time is right for this sort of re-examination of movements, of radical thought and history — and that this goes hand in hand with people rediscovering their own agency. Have we reached a tipping point, where people are ready to accept the need for radical change, and willing to embrace the word — and the practice — of being radical?

**BA:** I'm not sure we're at any sort of tipping point. I'd say that the contested space of language is always contested, and we always have to fight for clarity and meaning. And language is plastic and dynamic, so we can't just settle on words and say, "Oh, these words completely describe me." That's number one.

As an educator I am allergic to labels. I am opposed to labels. I don't think they really capture who we are. And so I often say about myself that on the question of the First Amendment, I'm a fundamentalist. On the question of economics, I'm a socialist. On the question of government, I'm an anarchist. And on the question of sex, I'm a libertarian. But none of these capture me because they are all inadequate. So I'm resistant to easy labels.



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But with that caveat, I do think we have to use the words radical, socialist, communist, or anarchist, democratic socialist, or whatever words you want to use. Use them, but then you have to struggle for their meaning. You can't just use the label and be done with it — that's where dogma comes in. You put a label on yourself and then go back to sleep. That's not the point. The point is to trudge towards freedom, and that means always being alive to new interpretations and new possibilities.

Having said that, I am a radical and I am a socialist-communist-anarchist. That has always been true. Now what do I mean by that? By radical I go with the “Ella Baker” definition, which means going to the root.

I began my activism in the Black Freedom Movement, and then I was against the war. But slowly I realized that war in Vietnam was followed closely by the invasion of Santa Domingo, followed by the coup in Chile. **I realized it wasn't one war I was against, it was the system that made war so inevitable.** That's going to the root. Discovering the system and understanding that there is more going on than what you see right in front of you.



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**RD:** That seems to be a discovery a whole new generation is making right now: that the real fight is to transform institutions and systems – not to just fight against a policy, like the policy of starting a particular war.

**BA:** You know, there's the old story about a village with a river running through it, and one morning everyone is working in the fields and they see an abandoned baby floating down the river. So they jump into the river and save the baby. And the next day, two babies are discovered floating downstream, and they rescue them too. Eventually, the babies number in the dozens, and the village has organized and is spending a lot of time dealing with and saving the abandoned babies. And finally, someone says, "Why don't we go upriver and see if we can discover why all these babies are falling into the river?" **That person is a radical.** He wants to go to the root of it. He wants to understand why this is happening. He's not just seeing what's in front of him.

So I am a radical. I want to go to the root. I want to see more. I want to see what the systemic problems are, not just the symptoms of those problems. To me, that is a radical.



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I'm also a socialist with a small s and a communist with a small c. What do I mean by that? I mean that capitalism and imperialism have exhausted themselves, and have no worthwhile solutions to offer humanity. And if we continue on with the madness of predation, we will reach the end of the line and plunge into the abyss in short order.

**Capitalism is an astonishingly productive system on some levels, but it always brings out the worst qualities in us and it always leads to crisis.** It always leads to evisceration.

And because it's an ever-expanding whirlwind, it eventually and always leads to catastrophe and devastation. So I'm anti-capitalist. I think we need to find a way to share the wealth. And that makes me a socialist.

**RD:** In your new book, *Demand the Impossible*, you repeatedly ask, What if? It mirrors a recurring theme in *Radical Democracy*—the necessity of invoking radical imagination, of collectively imagining new ways of doing things, to bring about real change. Why is this initial step of collective, radical imagination so important?

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**BA: If we don't invoke that radical imagination, we end up debating only what's acceptable in the mainstream, only what's on offer from the powerful.**

Think of any moment of great change in history. For example, it's impossible to imagine women having the right to vote at a certain point in history. It's against the Constitution, it's against the law, it's against the founders, it's against the Bible. Who could imagine such a thing? Yet the Suffragettes and the radicals who were their allies and comrades imagined it, fought for it, won the majority opinion, and women eventually won the right to vote.

Who could imagine an end to slavery in 1850? The Fugitive Slave Act was under discussion, but not slavery just being abolished. It was the major source of wealth in the entire country. No one could imagine it being abolished. And yet, not only could the people who were driving the conversation, those who were running away from slavery imagine it, but abolitionists began to imagine it. And eventually it led to a great Civil War, and then we could all imagine it. The world shifted.

I'm saying that we need to unleash our radical imaginations precisely because if we don't, we get stuck in the status quo in a way that's unacceptable



to the future — and that the status quo is actually a source of violence and pain to the marginalized and the oppressed, and so we have to imagine beyond that. I don't think our tactics and our strategies can be as fully developed as they ought to be if we can't imagine and state what we're fighting for.

**RD:** Early on in the book you talk about your meeting with another revolutionary, Manolis Glezos, the Greek resistance fighter and writer and politician. You quote him saying, "I'm interested in people collectively discovering their own power. That's an entirely different thing from an individual or a party in power." It seems this sense of people discovering their own power, their own agency, happens in cyclical waves or surges. Are we experiencing one of those now? Or is that beside the point?

**BA:** No, it's not beside the point. It's a central point, and my own read is that we are experiencing that now. But time will tell. I'm not certain that we are. It feels to me like we're on the verge of the fourth American Revolution, in the centuries-old struggle for black freedom. We had the American Revolution, we had the struggle against slavery, and then we had the great Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, and now here we are with Black Lives Matter.



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It doesn't feel like a wholly new thing — it feels like a continuation. And the detractors of the movement today sound exactly like the detractors of the Civil Rights Movement, or the detractors of the abolitionist movement.

Some liberals, say, “Well, it's good, but it's not realistic.” Exactly! We're demanding the impossible. Others say, “It's disrespectful, go slow, take it easy.” You can read the words of Martin Luther King or Ella Baker or many others, to repudiate that argument. But yes, I think we're in the midst of something huge, and I think the notion of agency is central.

Think historically for a minute about the trajectory of African Americans from the abolition of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. For that whole hundred years, black people rose up, black people resisted, black people tried to fight against the regime of terror, of lynching. They tried to fight against segregation and Jim Crow. They tried to fight to get the vote and to have a decent education and to get jobs. Then something happened, and it's a little bit magical or a little bit unpredictable. Somewhere in the late 1950s, early 1960s, a critical mass of people got it into their head, not just that they knew they were oppressed, but that if they acted,



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collectively and individually, they could find a new world. They could achieve something that had not been achieved. When enough people adopted that consciousness, then the status quo became unendurable, and it was crushed and changed and moved forward. That's how I think revolutions work.

**RD:** It seems connected to that idea of radical imagination, of creating a shared vision that can then be acted upon. Things get interesting when enough people share that new vision.

**BA:** What Glezos was pointing out is that often the missing element in revolution isn't critique: it's confidence, it's agency. It's a sense that if we take an action we change the world. And when enough of us believe that, and take that collective action in the same direction, indeed we do change the world. We've seen it in our lifetimes. We've seen people say, enough is enough, we're not going to take it anymore, and I'm going to take a risk.

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**RD:** After Trump's election, the only change "on offer from the powerful," as you put it, has been to reform the Democratic Party. Working within that narrowly defined debate seems likely to sustain the two-party electoral system that brought us here, and prohibit any real change.

**BA:** I can't predict what will come, or how or when people will rise up, but **the Democrats' post-mortem is already anemic, narcissistic, myopic, and wrong.** They will focus on "clarity of message" and "refocusing on class," missing the fact that over three decades of bipartisan economic and foreign policy have brought us here: permanent war, a hollowed out economy, masses of people trapped in meaninglessness and hurting badly, some of them wrapped in the delusion of American Exceptionalism.

I'm making an argument for fighting right here and now, for more democracy, more participation, more transparency, more peace, more civic involvement.



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And I'm fighting against another vision of what the future could be, which is permanent war, nuclear war, work camps, slavery. Those things are on offer, too. I think we have to be serious about the moment being now, and we have a responsibility to seize the moment.

**We need to focus our attention on building a mighty mass movement—opposed to white supremacy, American nationalism, war, bigotry, xenophobia, hatred of women—that can fight to overthrow capitalism and build a society fit for all, a place of peace and freedom, of joy and justice.**

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*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

A second interview with Bill Ayers is available on Medium.com. In it, he discusses more fully his book, *Demand the Impossible! A Radical Manifesto*.